

Dear Laurie Halse Anderson,

When I came back after a month long vacation to China, the first words out of my mom's friend's mouth was, "You look like you've had a little bit too much to eat there." Then, just as quickly as she came, she left, leaving me startled and embarrassed. I stood there, silent in the midst of a busy summer potluck scene. In fact, I was standing right next to the quintessential summer desert-apple pie. It was something I ate on rare occasion, so I couldn't let this sublime mixture of butter, flour, sugar and apple escape my taste buds. Defiant, I picked up the slice and walked away.

Yet the words never left my head.

Soon, I began to weigh myself. Every. Single. Day. The first day, stepping on the scale made me realize that I had gained 5 pounds over the trip. How it could be just five pounds? My legs were so much thicker, like shapeless tree trunks. So I began my mission to lose those five pounds so I could be me again. It started slowly and then quickly escalated. At first I began getting compliments.

"Do you dance? You have a dancer's body," distant family friends would note.

"You look so graceful!" They would claim. They only fueled my obsession. Despite the comments, I still believed that I wasn't thin enough. I wasn't beautiful enough. I wasn't me enough. It was a disease that festered every corner of my body, my brain, my whole entire life. So when I picked up *Wintergirls* from the library shelf, I thought I finally found someone to share my secrets with. Maybe I didn't have a best friend who wanted to be as tiny as me, like Lia and Cassie, but Lia could make up for it. Reading through the pages, I realized that Lia wasn't just a character in the book that you crafted, she was me. Like me, Lia calculated every single calorie that entered her body. Like me, Lia both revered and feared the bathroom scale. Like me, Lia hurt every single person that loved her with every refusal to take another bite.

How could she just turn her family away? Couldn't she see their worried glances, their downturned faces?

Your raw writing, so full of honesty, truth and downright pain made me realize that I couldn't criticize Lia because I *was* Lia. After reading the final page of the book, the faces of those who loved me-my parents, my sister, my brother, and my friends quickly flashed before my eyes. The only thing missing from that list of who loved me was myself, and right then and there, I decided that I couldn't do this anymore. I couldn't keep striving to be "beautiful" because at that point, I didn't know what beauty was. But I knew that being beautiful meant loving those who loved me.

In *Wintergirls*, people "yell at [Lia] because [she] can't see what they see," (197). I finally saw what Lia was experiencing, even though she couldn't, and in it, I saw myself. When Lia starts baking and thinks that the measuring spoons want to stick the ingredients into her mouth by their own accord, I remember my fear of touching butter, thinking that the fat would ooze through my skin and into my blood. When Lia's step mother offers her hot chocolate and she refuses, I remember my own mother offering me the same thing and me telling her that I didn't like chocolate, despite my freezing body and parched mouth.

The connection between Lia's life and my very own was eerily similar and it made me afraid of what I could become if I continued living life the way I was.

Your ending of *Wintergirls* gave me the final push for the hope that I could heal. In the end, even Lia began to measure herself "in strength, not pounds," (275). Since I saw Lia as reflection of myself, I began to think, if Lia can do it, I can do it. It became a mantra as I forced myself to pick up the fork and take another bite. Slowly, ever so slowly, I began to gain weight. It wasn't easy. Sometimes I would break down and cry. Sometimes I imagined a knife cutting all my fat away, my hand grasping the knife, shaking, inching towards my soft flesh, but Lia's tenacious attitude survived with me, whispering sweet and encouraging words, telling me to let go. Even after I closed the book, Lia was there with me, step by step and even though I desperately wanted to, I didn't give up.

I truly believe that without your book, I wouldn't be here writing this letter to you today. I would have shrunk into a ghost of myself, disillusioned into believing that I was helping myself become beautiful. But because of your book, I am strong, happy and hopeful. Like Lia, I "am learning how to taste everything," (276). Most importantly, without your book, I wouldn't have realized the most important thing of all: that I am beautiful.

Thank you for Ms. Anderson, for everything,

Teresa Zhan